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IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *ARRANGED MARRIAGE*

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Abstract:

Diaspora Writing has slowly emerged as one of the major areas in the field of Indian Writing in English giving expression to immigrant experience and sensitively handling the issues of cultural dilemmas and displacement, self and identity, nostalgia and loss, sense of excitement and achievement as experienced by immigrants. The paper aims to analyse these issues associated with immigrant experience as expressed in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short story collection Arranged Marriage.

KEYWORDS:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *Arranged Marriage*, immigrant experience.

INTRODUCTION:

Writing about expatriate writing Jasbir Jain observes "Expatriate writing occupies a significant position between cultures and countries. It generates theory and defines positions as it constructs a new identity which negotiates boundaries and confines and relates to different temporal and spatial metaphors. Cultures travel, take root or get dislocated and individuals internalize nostalgia or experience amnesia."(Jain:11) In the recent times with the growing importance of multicultural discourse the expatriate writers while performing their roles, succinctly described above, are occupying the center stage of Indian writing in English and their giving expression to immigrant experience has assumed significance.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has emerged as one of the major writers in English writing about Indian diaspora in America and immigrant experience. Born in 1956 in Calcutta, India, Divakaruni shifted base to USA to pursue her doctoral degree, where her teaching and literary career flourished. Today she is well known as an American- Indian writer writing novels, short stories, poems and columns. She is also quite active on social issues and works for non-profit organizations like *Daya*, *Pratham* and *Maitri* that work for the betterment of disadvantaged, south Asian women and children. It is this involvement with women's causes and *Maitri* "...which eventually led her to write *Arranged Marriage*, a work that includes stories about the abuse and courage of immigrant women."(Shukla: 100-101) Major among her works include novels like *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of my Heart* (1999), short story collection like *Arranged Marriage* (1995), collection of poems like *Black Candel* (1991)

As a diaspora writer much of Divakaruni's work deals with the immigrant experience "...encompassing a wide variety of themes..." and showing "...the experiences and struggles involved in women trying to find their own identities." (Shukla:102) . Her works are largely set in India and U.S.A. and often focus on the experiences of South Asian immigrants. Her *Arranged Marriage* is about women from India caught between two worlds. Here her poetry fuses with prose to create eleven memorable portraits. In *The Mistress of Spices*, Tilo, who runs a grocery store seems a magical figure, she provides people with spices not only for cooking but also for homesickness and alienation that the Indian immigrants in her shop experience. In recently published *One Amazing Thing* the walls dividing characters and cultures seem to collapse as the novel progresses. Thus it seems Divakaruni basically writes to unite people and cultures, to destroy myths and stereotypes. Through her writing, it seems she dissolves boundaries between people of

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different backgrounds, communities, cultures, and even worlds.

Portrayal of immigrant experience in Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*: The short story collection *Arranged Marriage* is one of her acclaimed books. It "is already a best seller in America, and has won the PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Prize for fiction and American Book Award, and the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award for fiction" (Divakaruni: Inside page) In it "Divakaruni deals with a variety of issues...including racism, interracial relationship, economic disparity, abortion and divorce." (Shukla: 101) There are eleven stories in the book and most of them deal with the immigrant experiences of Indian women who navigate between two cultures, countries, worlds—Indian and American-- in the course of their struggle to find their own identities.

The story *Clothes* is about a Bengali girl, Sumita, full of dreams about the great America, a land of fun, peace and prosperity. She marries America based young man Somesh Sen who runs a small store there and lives in a congested two room flat along with his parents. Sumita has to keep up the pretence of happiness and affluence because her parents have married her to an American with great expectations but an ugly side of America struck one day when her husband is shot dead in his shop by burglars. The story shows the uncertain journey of Sumita's "...unlived life..." (Divakaruni: 31) There are two choices before her either to go back to India and live a life of humiliation as a widow like a dove "...with cut-off wings" (Divakaruni: 33) or to continue to stay in America and reinvent her identity. She chooses the later.

Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs comes as a rude shock to all those popular assumptions about happy, peaceful and prosperous life in America. The story is about an Indian-American couple who has to live a life of insult, humiliation and insecurity suffering the racial prejudices prevalent in certain sections of American society. Their relatives in India think that Bikram is running an automobile empire in America but in reality he is "only a mechanic who had a dingy garage in an undesirable part of town" (Divakaruni: 44). The story hints at the plights of poor Indian-Americans, the problems of race and ethnicity, the conflict between reality and expectation, perception and illusion. The bitter irony in a popular Bengali song is evident here when an aspiring unmarried girl anticipates:

*Will I marry a prince from a far-off magic land
Where the pavements are silver and the roofs all
gold? (Divakaruni: 56)*

The story smashes the popular notion about America as a land of peace and prosperity, safety and security, a land that gives and gives in abundance. Ironically enough from this couple America has snatched everything instead of giving.

The Word Love is about a Calcutta-born fatherless girl brought up single-handedly by her mother with all love and passion in a strictly traditional atmosphere where falling in love is strictly forbidden with a belief that falling in love has an inevitable tragic end bringing disgrace and humiliation to girl and her family. The girl goes abroad to pursue her studies, falls in love with a flamboyant American young man and stays with him without knowledge of her mother. The mother gets the wind of it and snaps all ties with the daughter. The daughter is restless and emotionally collapses. She could not give her best to her boyfriend who in return turns away from her. The poor girl is torn between two pulls, two poles, and two worlds and finally decides to live life on her own terms. Now she feels free, free from the bondage of possessive love and burden of expectations. The story throws light on the predicament of immigrant children of Indian parents who are brought up by their Indian parents with one set of values and are exposed to different set of values in an adopted country. The predicament of such children results from the fact that they cannot escape the ramifying consequences of their situation.

A Perfect Life works on two levels. On the one hand it celebrates the new found freedom and emancipation an Indian woman experiences in America and on the other hand it also celebrates the universality of motherly instinct present in woman behind all pretensions of modernity. Meera Bose, a Calcutta-born girl living in America, hates the Indian way that seems to believe a girl is reared only to get married and have children. Meera wants to live life on her own terms. She says "Not that I was against marriage—or even against having a child. I just wanted to make sure that when it happened, it would be on my own terms, because I wanted it." (Divakaruni: 76-77) That is why when in America she lives with a man without marriage enjoying her freedom and pleasure with no strings attached. She sneers at the Indian women's obsession with child-bearing and considers mother-love as something "Real and primitive and dangerous" (Divakaruni: 75). But her motherly instinct is roused at the sight of a seven year old stray boy whom she finds in the staircase. Her efforts to adopt the boy fail but she realizes the power of mother instinct. A close look at Meera's character reveals that the process of immigration to developed country and advanced society means a lot to an Indian woman so far as assertion of her individuality, freedom of choice, emancipation is concerned.

The Maid Servant's Story through juxtaposition of two different stories mainly focuses on the pathetic condition of fettered lives of Indian women irrespective of their social position. At the root of outer glitter and the so-called elevated status of Indian woman may lay her subservience, helplessness and powerlessness as the present story shows, which is in sharp contrast to what their counterparts in developed countries experience. Manisha, a US based daughter of Bengali parents realizes this after spending many years there.

The Disappearance shows the complexities and intricacies of human nature in the context of lives of immigrants. There is something strange and mysterious about the intent of the story. It is about a US based Bengali young man who is happily married to his educated Bengali wife. But the wife suddenly disappears leaving the young man and his son disheartened. All attempts to trace her whereabouts fail. He does everything to find her out for he loved her. After a year it came to light that she had disappeared with her wedding jewelry. But with whom? Now he seethes in anger. Finally agrees to mother's proposal to remarry but only to simple village girl. But the first wife continues to haunt him with her dishonesty for he was an honest man. Mystery about the disappearance continues. The story moves from shock to disgust to tragic haunting leaving behind many puzzling, complicated, unresolved questions about the issues of love, marriage, trust in the lives of immigrants. The tendency of the immigrant Indians to turn to homeland to select their brides adds another social and cultural dimension to the issue.

Doors shows a happily married couple Deepak and Preeti. Deepak is India-born US educated man who has married Preeti, an America reared daughter of Indian-American parents. In spite of their different cultural background they make a perfect couple. Their married life is a smooth sail till Raj, Deepak's childhood friend from India comes to stay with them. Raj's Indian idea of openness and frankness comes in conflict with Preeti's American idea of privacy. Deepak, having exposure of both Indian and American socio-cultural conditions tries to negotiate the growing cultural gap between Preeti and Raj but fails and the story ends with Preeti creating a scene and Raj leaving the house. Here Preeti's obsession with door shutting comes to represent one of the aspects of American idea of privacy.

The Ultrasound presents two childhood friends Arundhati and Anju, the narrator. Anju marries an Indian-American and goes to America while Arundhati is married off in a rich traditional Indian family. Once they shared one world but now they are far away and inhabit different worlds, a situation that determines their fate in different ways. Both become pregnant at the same time and enjoy and share the thrill and sensation of motherhood through letters and telephone. The ultrasound technique which is also used to identify the sex of the fetus however devastates the life of Arundhati. The ultrasound revealed that she was bearing a girl child whereas her husband and in-laws wanted a boy child to further the family tree. They force her to abort the girl child. Anju's heart goes for Arundhati but she can do nothing. Technology is changing the face of the world everywhere but it can do little to the traditional, conservative mindsets of the people. Technology can do little to the fate, identity, dignity, freedom of choice of women which are often compromised to serve the interests of conservative, patriarchal societies. Anju painfully realizes that had she been in India she would have perhaps faced the same situation.

Affair presents two mismatched Indian American young couples—Abha and Ashoke, Meena and Srikant -- and deals mainly with the attempts of the two wives to negotiate with their personal freedom, happiness and identity. Abha is average-looking and rooted in traditional upbringing. Ashoke expects her to be little open. Meena is bold, beautiful and fashionable lady whereas Srikant is the exact opposite—reserved, reticent and average looking. The two wives Abha and Meena are best friends and confidante. Abha thinks Meena and Ashoke suite each other and would be a perfect couple as they admire each other. She thinks all along they have an affair. Meena admits to have an affair but it turns out that the man in her life is not Ashoke but an average-looking middle-aged, considerate man called Charles, one who makes her feel so special. Abha's upbringing tells her that Meena had done social and moral wrong by being unfaithful to her husband but agrees she did a right thing on personal level because she has every right to pursue happiness. Taking a cue from Meena, Abha sets out on the path to find what she really wants in life. And in that picture her fault-finding, teasing husband is nowhere. The story thus deals with the lives of immigrant Indian American women who grapple with the issues of space, personal freedom, identity, individual happiness in a different socio-cultural setup. Human spirit by nature craves for individual freedom and happiness. It tries to assert itself as soon as it finds the space. Indian women are used to secondary and subservient existence in a patriarchal social setup but as soon as they get the space and opportunity they try to explore what they really want and try to carve out an identity of their own.

Meeting Mrinal presents two female characters Asha and Mrinal. They are childhood friends and competitors, and there is a secret envy between the two. Mrinal is prettier and smarter between the two. Asha thought herself very lucky and discontinued her studies when an Indian American chose her as his bride. She thought herself vindicated in comparison with Mrinal. Life went on. Mrinal completed her education, became an executive in a multinational company but remained single. Though Asha kept up the

pretence of happy married life, in reality her marriage is broken because her husband has ditched her and their teen-aged son for his secretary Jessica. Asha thinks herself a failure as she has lost a husband and a son who doesn't speak to her. When Asha and Mrinal meet for the first time after many years both pretend to be happy and content. Mrinal admires Asha's perfect life and breaks down to admit the pangs of her own loneliness in spite of her power and authority. The two bid farewell to each other but Asha carries the guilt of deceiving the best friend and tries to commit suicide but is saved by her teen-aged son. She realizes how much he cares for her and decides to confess all to Mrinal the next day. The story thus ends on a spirit of acceptance and reconciliation of the imperfections and shortcomings of life. It shows two different pictures of two women with two different notions of success and happiness but as it often proves true happiness is illusive by nature, that nobody's life is perfect, that life has to be lived and accepted as it comes our way. The story underlines the fact that immigrating to greener pastures is not always a passport to sure happiness and that giving up marriage and family for the sake of material success also does not make life perfect.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion it can be said that *Arranged Marriage* mostly deals with lives of experiences of immigrant women caught between pulls and pressures of two worlds and cultures—Indian and American. It shows their struggle to reinvent their self and identity, their grappling with issues of cultural dilemmas and displacement, the issues like subservient position of women in old societies like India and the promise of freedom and equality in new societies like America, issues of race and ethnicity, love, marriage and happiness in human life. The handling of all these issues is however done in the spirit of building bridges across peoples and communities, cultures and backgrounds.

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